

FINDING OURSELVES: SEARCHING FOR THE ROOTS OF INTERPRETATION

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Ask an interpreter to describe the evolution of the profession of Interpretation, and a blank stare might be the answer. Where did we come from? Who thought up this business? Who trained the first interpreters?

Did the profession begin with Freeman Tilden? Or was it earlier with Enos Mills, or maybe Liberty Hyde Bailey? What was John Muir's contribution? What about Henry David Thoreau, Emerson, and Burroughs? Did Ben Franklin, Cicero and Plato help shape our profession? Possibly. Probably.

Defining Interpretation poses a challenge for interpreters. Twenty interpreters would easily come up with 20 different and accurate definitions, each expressing a different insight about the interpretive process. Even when Tilden penned his famous definition, he complained that by defining Interpretation, he feared he was limiting the concept. Tilden followed his formal definition with two very different pseudo-definitions and six principles, all in an effort to explain the interpretive process completely. Later Tilden synthesized the meaning of Interpretation into love of nature and love of people.

A key obstacle in searching for the roots of Interpretation is the vagueness of a single definition with which all interpreters would agree. When we speak about Interpretation, one interpreter might be referring to basic information and communication skills while another focuses on inspiration, provocation and exciting revelation.

Indeed interpreters practiced the art and science of Interpretation long before this century; they were not necessarily adhering completely to Tilden's definition, but they were seeking beyond the obvious, providing revelations, and provoking their audiences. Among this group might fall the soothsayers, Old Testament prophets, astrologers, and philosophers. Where modern interpreters seek knowledge, insight and truth, these ancient interpreters had different goals in mind. Socrates and Plato may have sought truth, but some others applied interpretive techniques to pursue power, wealth or entertainment. They interpreted dreams, clouds and trickery to achieve their desired ends. Some may have believed in what they were doing, but many were ancient scam artists.

For centuries, Native Americans have interpreted their history and their beliefs through dance and song. Cicero interpreted the politics of Rome through his eloquent speech. Michelangelo furnished images for our spiritual beliefs. Beethoven brought majestic sounds to the feelings in our hearts. Ben Franklin's "Poor Richard's Almanac" lent a comical touch to peoples' frailties. Andy Rooney and Garrison Kellior interpret things which usually go unnoticed. None of these individuals would classify themselves as "interpreters" in the way we see

ourselves, but they all applied some of the principles of Interpretation in their fields. They represent different phases in the evolutionary story of a profession which came into its own in the 20th century.

For a common focus, we will define Interpretation as Tilden did:
"An educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information." Using this definition of Interpretation, we may restrict our search to the past 100 years.

The modern profession of Interpretation probably began with Enos A. Mills, a crusading preservationist, naturalist, nature guide, author and teacher. Mills, like John Muir and other famous naturalists, was an intuitive interpreter. No one trained Mills; he learned about nature by discovering and observing nature. Mills learned about Interpretation by trial and error. But Mills went a step further than any of his predecessors or contemporaries; he analyzed his interpretive techniques, established principles for the profession of Interpretation, and trained others in this profession. He called his profession "Nature Guiding", and in "The Adventures of a Nature Guide" (1920), Mills described this new profession in detail. Mills' dedication to the environment and insights into the profession of modern Interpretation should be an inspiration to all interpreters today.

The sudden death of Enos Mills in 1922 at age 52 left a void in the leadership of the new profession. For several decades, the National Park Service would be the foremost organization using and promoting nature guides. However, Mills, who had been a major player in creating the Service and many new parks, had strongly criticized certain policies of the agency's powerful director, Stephen Mather. This very public battle may have influenced Mather's decision to ignore Mills' new style of Interpretation and instead promote an academic, traditional approach to education in the parks.

For the next 35 year, educators with Ph.D.'s dominated educational activities in the Park Service and in the profession of Interpretation. Many of the elements of excitement, revelation, inspiration, and hands-on learning which were at the heart of Mills' new profession, were replaced by 50 minute lectures and taking the ranger's word for something. During national meetings of Chief Park Naturalists, attendees would present their latest research papers. The emphasis was on research and lecturing.

But all was not lost. Many rangers had had contacts with Enos Mills or his students, and they realized there were more exciting ways to learn about the environment. Also some educators were natural interpreters because of their love of subject and people. So until the late 1950's, emphasis and direction for Interpretation vacillated. There were some good examples of Interpretation done by individuals, and there were many activities which could not be called Interpretation at all. The official term replacing "nature guiding" was "educational activities". In 1957, Freeman Tilden would reestablish the profession as Enos Mills envisioned, and our profession would be back on track with a new name - Interpretation.

Freeman Tilden was not a park interpreter. Tilden's careers spanned the pressures of being a journalist, a non-fiction author, and author of dozens of

plays on Broadway. At age 58, Tilden was invited to join the National Park Service. His job would consist of traveling to park areas, writing about them, and trying to get a handle on the diverse interpretive activities presented throughout the system. Tilden agreed, and thus began nearly four decades of remarkable contributions to the Park Service and interpreters everywhere.

In 1957 Tilden wrote INTERPRETING OUR HERITAGE which was immediately hailed as the "bible" for all interpreters. Tilden did not limit his principles and applications to understanding natural history. He believed that people were an intricate part of nature and his principles were as valid for learning about fungi as they were for understanding a battle at a Civil War site.

Since Tilden, several interpreters have written books about techniques in Interpretation, but no one has captured the essence of our profession as Tilden did. Volumes would be needed to grasp the contributions of Mills and Tilden to the profession of Interpretation; space does not allow such examination here.

Since 1960, Interpretation has experienced a surge in Living History presentations, environmental education programs, an emphasis on biological diversity, global climate change, air quality and other concerns. Two national interpretive organizations have merged into the National Association for Interpretation. Thousands of volunteers are assisting with interpretive activities across the country. In short, the profession is growing in stature and popularity, but where are we headed? We are the next chapter in this evolving story. We will write that chapter.

"A few people, for years, have practiced interpretation occasionally. It has made good, and it has a place in national life...it need not be confined to national parks. There might well be interpreters in every locality of the land. City parks and the wild places near cities are available to thousands of people and are excellent places for the cultural and inspiring excursions with interpreters. 'Ere long, interpreting will be an occupation of honor and distinction. May the tribe increase!"

-Enos Mills, 1920

Recommended Reading:

Enos A. Mills, THE ADVENTURES OF A NATURE GUIDE, 1920. A new edition (1990) is available in paperback from New Past Press, Friendship, WI 53934.

Freeman Tilden, INTERPRETING OUR HERITAGE, 1957. The most recent edition (1977) is available in paperback from The University of North Carolina Press, P.O.Box 2288, Chapel Hill NC 27514.